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ABSTRACT

In 1993 the New Jersey Department of Education documented a range of criminal and unethical conduct in the Newark public schools, and state investigators found major deficiencies in administration, educational programs, and finance. In 1995, the courts ordered the state takeover of the Newark school district. This report, by the State District Superintendent of the Newark Public Schools, outlines the steps being taken to provide a better education for the city's children. Initial reorganization of the central office redirected $26.3 million dollars into education programs, including full-day kindergarten. An Advisory Board was established, but the state retained control over personnel matters. The legislation specifies that, after 5 years, local control can be restored if the district meets specific benchmarks, but the state can retain control as it has with two other New Jersey districts. To ensure sound governance after local control is re-established, a Strategic Plan has been developed, with 11 objectives. Implicit in each objective is increased accountability of all constituent groups, and each of the 11 addresses creating the best climate and support systems needed for children to succeed in the classroom and in the future. Governance is a key area of the school reform, and efforts are concentrating on shifting the locus of control, and economic and human capital, to School Leadership Teams (SLTs). Each SLT is led by an assistant superintendent responsible for 14 to 16 schools, each of which will have a building-level School Core Team. Principals have been given authority to develop their own budgets and select their own staff. Parental involvement is an important part of the change process, as are community partnerships. (SLD)

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State District Superintendent

Newark Public Schools

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Educational Policy Conversations

Institute for Education and Social Policy
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STATE INTERVENTION IN THE NEWARK PUBLIC SCHOOLS

by Beverly L. Hall, Ed.D.

State District Superintendent, Newark Public Schools

In reconstructing the Newark Public Schools, we are changing the ways students learn and teachers teach, but our efforts and their results are not restricted to the classroom. In Newark we are building an institution whose students can both contribute to and benefit from a city that is also in the process of remaking itself.

There is a sense in Newark that more than 30 years of decline may be finally coming to an end. As in New York City, crime in Newark has dropped dramatically: homicides declined by 41 percent last year. In addition, the opening of the New Jersey Performing Arts Center seemed to herald a new attitude in a city where cynicism, not optimism, is usually the order of the day. There is talk of waterfront development and a new baseball stadium, and of new businesses relocating to Newark. The Task Force on Newark in the 21st Century, an independent panel composed of business and community leaders, foundation executives and others, has renewed the energies of longtime activists who want to seize this moment, when anything seems possible in a city that others have long given up for dead. They are encouraging a long-range, regional vision for a city that last drafted a blueprint for the future some 20 years ago. While economic and social developments are emerging in our city, it is not clear whether these changes will impact the way the city is governed. In order for our efforts to succeed, a community and political environment must be created that will sustain a restructured and re-purposed school system, once it is turned over to local control. The conduct and outcome of the upcoming and future municipal elections will have an important bearing on whether that environment can exist.

The decline of the Newark Public Schools — and the city — was many years in the making, and involved an intricate web of policies, backroom deals and corruption that, to some extent, still ensnares Newark. For an account of that history, I highly recommend "Ghetto Schooling," by Jean Anyon, Associate Professor at Rutgers University and Director of the Institute for Research in Urban Education.

Anyon documents that the endemic pattern of Newark's mismanagement was not unique to the black leadership: even in the latter part of the nineteenth century, when the city and schools were largely populated by poor, ethnic whites, children were taught in dirty, overcrowded classrooms in a school system fraught with corruption.

As William Julius Wilson notes in his forward, the implications of Anyon's analysis are clear: educational reforms in urban school districts have to be part of a larger effort to address the problems of poverty and racial isolation in our inner cities. Schools are part of that critical social improvement process, and are essential to it.

With these thoughts in mind, let us examine the conditions that triggered the state intervention in July 1995.

* Based in part on a presentation to the Institute of Education and Social Policy at New York University, January 21, 1998.

The Status Quo: Before State Intervention

In its comprehensive compliance investigation report of 1993, the New Jersey Department of Education documented the range of criminal and unethical conduct that cheated thousands of Newark public school students of their right to a thorough and efficient education.

State investigators found and recorded major deficiencies in governance, management, educational programs and finance.

Newark's school budget was more than $500 million dollars, and its annual per pupil expenditure was nearly $10,000 — competitive with suburban school district levels and one of the highest in the nation. But too few of those dollars reached the children or the classroom. A disproportionate share of the school budget was concentrated outside of the classroom. The Newark Public Schools was the second largest employer in the city and its primary job was to provide and develop jobs for a city in economic decline. The ultimate victims were the 45,000 children who attended Newark's 82 public schools. Only eight of those schools had 50% of its youngsters reading at grade level.

In all too many instances, our children were expected to learn in classrooms where walls were scrawled with obscene graffiti, in buildings where decent bathrooms — with doors for privacy and tissue supplies — were nonexistent. Many schools were in various stages of disrepair and deterioration.

Many principals had all but abdicated their responsibilities, even failing to carry out routine reporting of attendance. Some schools were favored over others in the kinds of services and supplies they received from the school district's central office. But generally the schools and the district office occupied separate universes, each undisturbed by the other.

Many teachers were ill-prepared: only four eighth-grade teachers in the entire scool system were qualified to teach Algebra I. Pupil attendance was very low — the average daily attendance for the 1994-1995 school year was 89.1%. Freshman high school classes dwindled by the senior year — the 1995 graduating class at one high school, for example, consisted of only 93 students; four years earlier, that class entered as 325 freshmen.

The Conditions Of State Intervention

In July 1995, Administrative Law Judge Stephen G. Weiss issued a summary judgment that ordered the New Jersey Department of Education to assume responsibility for the operations of the Newark Public Schools. State legislation established a state-operated district for five years, extendible by permission of the legislature. By law, the elected school board, the executive superintendent and top administrators were removed. I was appointed state district superintendent, with broad authority to both set policy and administer the district.

The legislation governing state-operated school districts in New Jersey clearly spells out the mandate for the state district superintendent. Within the first year, we were charged with the reorganization of the central district office. In those initial days, my office often resembled a war room as executive staff carefully planned the sensitive but necessary realignment of priorities and budget that would involve the lay-off of some 600 non-instructional employees in July 1996. For example, in the food service area, unchecked hiring and escalating costs over the years had given Newark a per pupil lunch expenditure of $4.00, compared to the $1.98 per pupil average cost in the rest of the state.

As a result of our reorganization, we were able to redirect $26.3 million into educational programs for students. For the first time, we were able to provide every five-year old in Newark with the opportunity to

enroll in full-day kindergarten. To spur innovation in the classroom, our schools were encouraged to submit proposals for the integration of technology in their curriculum and the development of new science programs. The newly-available funds also enabled us to provide guidance services in every elementary school and to supplement our substance-abuse prevention programs.

During that first year, we also spent $3.4 million in new textbooks for all students, and opened Technology High School, our new state-of-the-art technical and vocational high school.

Before our children stepped foot inside their schools that first year, we cleaned up the horrific and unhealthy conditions that had been tolerated for decades, hired more security guards and created an internal investigative unit to address corrupt practices and wrongdoing at every level in the district.

We also evaluated central office staff and each school principal and vice-principal during that first year and a half. We were permitted to dismiss any tenured school principal or vice-principal for inefficiency, incapacity, or unbecoming conduct. Since the beginning of state operation in July 1995, we have promoted and reassigned 16 existing employees to principal and vice-principal positions, and we have hired an additional 32 new principals and vice-principals.

According to the legislation, a 15-member Advisory Board was also to be established, with 13 members appointed by the commissioner and two by the Newark City Council for two-year terms, subject to renewal. Gradually, over five years, the board will vote on curriculum, legal and fiscal matters. The state superintendent, however, retains veto power until the full reestablishment of local control, and the Advisory Board will not vote on or even discuss personnel issues as long as the district is state-operated. Prior to state intervention, the school board voted on every permanent, substitute and summer employee hired, a practice that led to enormous irregularities and inefficiencies.

It has not been an easy adjustment for some board members, many of whom thought they would have authority equivalent to an elected board. Initially, the City Council appointed two former board members, whose terms have since expired. This year, the state appointed several new members from academia and the private sector. Their skill and professional comportment has already raised the level of discourse among board members.

The prevailing view in the pre-intervention school system was that the interest of adults took precedence over the interests of children. At times, this attitude has manifested itself in our relationships with unions, whose representatives do not always share our vision. However, it is our belief that as we progress, and as our children benefit from the programs and policies we have initiated, our union members will recognize that advancements for our children are advancements for all the members of our community.

The current legislation calls for school board elections to be held in the fourth full academic year following the creation of the state-operated school district. At that time, a nine-member board will be elected from among the 15 municipal- and state-appointed Advisory Board members.

After five years, the Commissioner can recommend to the State Board of Education that local control be reestablished, based on the annual assessment of progress and the state certification of the district. There are specific benchmarks that the district must meet by June 2000, in instruction and organizational and fiscal management. For example, 80 percent of fourth-graders must score above the minimum levels of proficiency in reading, 75 percent in math and 80 percent in writing. In the area of organizational/fiscal management, the district must meet state standards for financial controls, cash investments and financial reporting.

The State Board can decide to continue the state-operated school district if the district fails to achieve certification, as was the case in the two other state-operated school districts in New Jersey, Jersey City and Paterson. Jersey City has been under state operation since 1989, and Paterson since 1991.

Since, in the cases of both Jersey City and Paterson, former board members and administrators from the pre-state operation era have been reelected to the school boards, the process of transition to local control for all the state-operated districts has come under greater scrutiny. We cannot risk a return to local control that also brings back those practices of the past, which deprived our children of their right to a sound educational system that prepared them for success in and out of the classroom. In Newark, we have worked to ensure sound governance in the post-state operation years by constructing a five-year Strategic Plan that clearly delineates lines of authority and accountability throughout the school district.

The Strategic Plan

The Strategic Plan enables us to more efficiently implement reform, monitor progress and identify areas where capacity-building must occur. It is our statement about what we believe are crucial elements in constructing a culture where student achievement is the number one priority for everyone who works in the Newark school district.

Our Strategic Plan is comprised of 11 objectives, and implicit in each objective is increased accountability of all constituent groups, including students, teachers, administrators, parents and the community.

The objectives are:

1. Improving the efficiency of and effectiveness of School Core Teams — our vehicle for school-based management;
2. Improving pupil performance, by better delivering the instruction and classroom services that students need, whether they are bilingual, gifted and talented and/or economically disadvantaged;
3. School restructuring — implementing models of excellence for kindergarten, middle grades and secondary schools;
4. Integrating technology into instructional programs;
5. Developing a comprehensive staff development plan for principals and teachers;
6. Providing appropriate programs for special populations, including special education and at-risk students;
7. Ensuring clean and safe environments in our schools;
8. Assuring equity and diversity in hiring and promotion;
9. Increasing accountability in fiscal management;
10. Assuring the efficient flow of resources to schools; and
11. Laying the groundwork for reestablishing local control by building the capacity of the Advisory Board to govern more effectively, and by providing opportunities for greater parental involvement.

Improving pupil performance is our primary goal, and each objective of our Strategic Plan addresses creating the best climate and support systems needed for our children to succeed in our classrooms and in their futures.

Governance As a Key Element of School Reform

Governance involves more than an elected school board: it is dependent upon how each school engages its children's parents and our community. Principal leadership is also key to sound governance, which in turn leads to higher standards for student achievement and the institution of classroom reforms that will endure.

One of our first tasks when we arrived in Newark was the assessment of each of 250 principals and vice-principals. The assessment was conducted by consultants with extensive school administrative experience. Each principal and vice-principal prepared a portfolio and was observed on three different occasions in the first 12 months of state operation. Since 1996, sixteen principals and twenty-nine vice-principals have been newly-appointed to their posts.

We believe effective and consistent leadership is critical in several areas:

- The supervision of instruction, so that student achievement is the primary priority;
- Creating a positive school climate;
- Supporting ongoing staff development opportunities for teachers;
- Fostering meaningful parent and community involvement; and
- Implementing school-based decision making.

We recognize that not every educator is prepared to step directly from an instructional position into an administrative position. One of our most important strategies for building leadership skills has been the establishment of the Principals' Leadership Institute. Our PLI provides continuing professional development for principals and vice-principals, and is offered in collaboration with eight colleges and universities, including Teachers College, Fordham University, Rutgers University and Seton Hall. PLI is funded by three foundations — Chase, Grable and Victoria. In surveying our principals who have participated in the Principals' Leadership Institute, many have praised the program. "It is at one of those sessions that I get reminded of what my true role as an administrator really is," one principal said. Another participant applauded the "collegial environment" which encouraged meaningful dialogue.

There are other elements of our Strategic Plan that are critical to the sound governance of the district in the future: school-based planning, parental involvement, community participation and school board development.

School-Based Planning

Since the intervention, our efforts have concentrated on shifting the locus of control, as well as economic and human capital, from downtown bureaucratic hierarchies to School Leadership Teams or SLTs. Each SLT is led by an assistant superintendent who is responsible for 14 to 16 schools, and building-level School Core Teams. The School Core Teams are comprised of representatives of various school-related constituencies (including principals, teachers, parents, union representatives, and students), who identify student needs and develop school improvement plans. Principals have been given the authority to develop their own budgets and to select teachers and staff for their schools. This is a new development in Newark. Under this administration, our principals have more support for initiating disciplinary action against non-functioning staff. The challenge for us will be to build in an accountability system that will survive after the district returns to local control.

We have no illusions about the complexity of the process. One obstacle we will have to overcome is an inherent mistrust of the system that has been fostered over time. In order to successfully change traditional uses of time, staff and money, school-based decision-making teams need to believe that their decisions will be honored by central office..

We anticipate that the School Core Teams will continue to evolve, and through proper training, increase their level of skill and competence to best meet the needs of the children they serve. We have designated facilitators to work with each of the schools to help the School Core Teams get up and running and guide them through the process. I am certain that my colleagues in New York City will concur that school-based decision-making and planning is a process that must be nurtured if it is to succeed.

Parental Involvement

A very important indicator of our success is our ability to more effectively engage parents in the learning process with their children. Research has shown over and over again that the influence of parents is still the most critical determining factor in a child's attitude and effort. If we as educators understand and believe this, it only makes sense that we partner with parents so that this tremendous resource will be used effectively on behalf of children. For school reform to really work parental involvement must be more than a sometime event.

In our Strategic Plan, we identify the components of parental involvement that we consider to be critical:

- Increase and improve school-to-home communications. The most important connection is the parent-teacher relationship. Providing teachers with the tools and skills that will enable them to utilize their time with parents more effectively is a part of this process, as is providing parents with the guidance they require to help children more at home.
- Encourage parent volunteerism in the school. Through a grant from the Victoria Foundation, we engaged the technical expertise of Academy Concepts, a Baltimore-based organization, to help us establish a structured volunteer program in each of our schools. Last school year we started 40 such Parent Volunteer Academies. Training of staff in 20 additional schools began last fall with the goal of having all 82 schools organized by the end of this school year.
- Parent leadership in decision-making is another important facet of parental involvement. With the help of a grant from the Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation, we have engaged a state-wide advocacy organization called SPAN (Statewide Parents' Advocacy Network) to sponsor the Parents' Leadership Institute. Of our first 35 participants, 10 parents have been engaged as interns who will help SPAN sponsor workshops for other parent leaders. Their priority is to work with those parents who are officers of parent organizations and who serve on school-based planning teams. Another institute began in February for more parents.

Community Partnerships

Involving the broader community is also important to school reform. We all recognize that children are affected by problems from home and from the neighborhood that the school alone cannot address. We have started to form cooperative arrangements with agencies to enhance services available to our children and their families. For example, two local agencies have agreed to prioritize social service referrals from our schools in order to help our families. Other agencies are sponsoring workshops or after school programs, in some cases for teachers and in others, for parents.

Another form of community support is through volunteer mentoring and tutoring programs. At present, nonprofit organizations have recruited about 2,000 volunteers from businesses and civic institutions to mentor and tutor our students. We expect this program will continue to grow as the national movement in volunteerism grows.

We have also been able to garner the support of local area corporations and foundations. Recently, the Lucent Technologies and Ford Foundations provided us with the means to inaugurate a $15 million program called "Project GRAD/Newark" which guarantees every student in Malcolm X Shabazz High School, beginning with the 1997-1998 freshmen, a college scholarship of $6,000 over four years if they meet certain, specific requirements. Through a $180,000 grant from the Prudential Foundation, we will be able to reopen the doors of the Newark Public Libraries on Saturdays for our children. Continental Airlines is rewarding our valedictorians and salutatorians with a "class trip." Brother International is providing digital notebooks to enhance the studies of young people in three of our schools. The Victoria Foundation is funding an Early Childhood Initiative with the Bank Street College of Education to develop models of excellence in early childhood education that will prepare our students for success in the higher grades and develop a capacity for lifelong learning.

There is another, equally important level of community involvement: developing among community leaders a consensus that a healthy, thriving public school system is integral to their own success, whether they are CEOs, religious leaders or small business owners. The Committee of Advocates for Newark's Children, spearheaded by the Prudential Foundation, has brought together a group of civic leaders who have provided the district with support and counsel.

We are convinced that a high level of parent and community engagement is critical to our success now and in building a base for returning governance of our schools to local control that will be responsible and responsive.

Advisory Board

We have committed ourselves to building the capacity of the Advisory Board — from which future school board candidates are likely to be chosen. With the assistance of the New Jersey School Boards Association, the district has offered Advisory Board training sessions, to brief board members on district policies and familiarize them with protocols so they understand their responsibilities and are able to function most effectively. The civic climate in Newark has not been conducive in recent years to restrained and respectful discourse, which anyone who has attended a school board or city council meeting in Newark can attest to. Nonetheless, if Newark is to attract the best and brightest to leadership roles, we must do everything we can to raise standards of behavior and the expectations of the Newark community about how public officials should conduct themselves.

Conclusion

What we are doing in Newark will have implications for other cities struggling with failing urban education systems. First and foremost, the message will be that systemic reform is possible, even in the face of that combination of student failure and corrupt management that is too often entrenched in our inner cities. I find myself over and over again having to assure many people, including educators and parents, that indeed, the Newark Public Schools can be reformed and students can achieve in our schools.

Each time I speak to community leaders and parents, I stress that rebuilding the Newark Public Schools is a shared responsibility. We must change perceptions, attitudes and work habits. I believe our Strategic Plan defines an ethic of responsibility and accountability — for parents and the larger community as well as principals and teachers — that is absolutely necessary for real improvement to occur.

At the midpoint of our third year, we are heartened by changes that are occurring. On January 7th, I presented the district's first Annual Report on the Strategic Plan to the New Jersey State Board of Education, and we were able to share several important accomplishments:

- Scores from the Stanford 9, a new and more demanding achievement test, revealed that students in four of the eight grade levels that took the test improved in reading, while students in six of the eight improved in language arts.
- In the area of math problem-solving, almost all grades showed improvement. On the Early Warning Test (which is a state test), math scores improved by nearly six percentage points. In the high schools, total Scholastic Achievement Test scores and High School Proficiency Test math scores increased two percent over last year.
- For the first time, the district distributed performance recognition awards to nineteen Newark schools that met or showed significant progress toward state standards. Each school received a $20,000 grant to advance the academic growth of their pupils.

We have also seen improvements in other indicators, such as attendance and truancy:

- The student attendance rate overall for the 1996-1997 school year was 90.2%, representing an improvement of 1.2% over the prior year, and a five-year high for student attendance. Only three times during the past 25 years has student attendance rated higher than the 1996-1997 mark.
- Our number of truants dropped from 4,709 during the 1995-1996 school year, to 2,925 in 1996-1997, a decrease of nearly 38%.
- Drop-out and graduation rates still present intractable problems: in the 1996-1997 school year, 1,636 of our 12th graders graduated and received diplomas, out of 1,770 who entered 12th grade that year. Four years earlier, 3,438 students had entered as freshmen.

There is a much more that remains to be done in Newark and our sense of urgency to get it done is enormous. In the 1997-1998 school year, we are continuing to build on our successes, including:

- Expansion of full-day kindergarten and early childhood programs;
- A $6 million dollar proposal for staff development in support of the Core Content Standards;
- Expansion of programs that teach parents how to help their children augment study and learning skills at home;
- Implementation of a comprehensive program for upgrading skills and competencies in reading/language arts and writing;
- A $2 million dollar proposal for upgrading school libraries; and
- Expansion of Scholastic Achievement Test and High School Proficiency Test prep programs.

Certainly, the process of returning the school district to local control is by no means simple. However, we are determined, in the time we are given, to institute a culture that places student success at the heart of public education in Newark. We know what is at stake. We know what must be done. We know that the only way we can successfully achieve those goals and objectives that will ensure our children's future is to waste no time, join hands with parents and the members of our community, and work hard for our children's sake.

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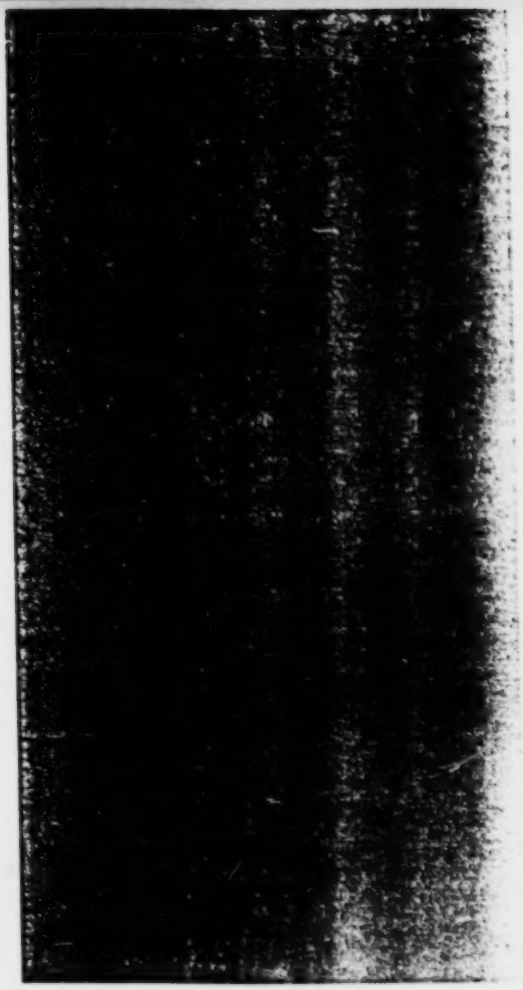

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